

## Letter From the Heartland

by Jane Greer

### We're Not as Dumb as They Think

It's gone just about too far this time.

In the past year, North and South Dakota were included in a group of states described as "America's Outback" by *Newsweek*. As if that weren't bad enough, both states were also left out of a Rand McNally photographic atlas. (The editors smiled urbanely, one imagines, and claimed the discrepancy was "inadvertent," but we of the Outback, the Buffalo Commons, America's waste-disposal lot, know better, from long experience.)

We lived through the ignominy. Sons and daughters of pioneers, we're survivors. We hitched up old Bossy to the plow and went about our daily lives as if nothing had hurt.

But now: the R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company has announced that it's coming out with a cigarette called, of all things, "Dakota," meant to appeal to young, poorly educated, lower-middle-class women all across the country. Kind of makes you want to move here, doesn't it?

Let us not forget that RJR has had to snuff one new product already this year: "Uptown," a cigarette targeting black Americans. Well, that particular group of Americans happens to form a large minority that gets *listened* to when it complains. Complain it did, and rightfully so, claiming that the marketing gimmick was not only patronizing but deadly: young black men are among the heaviest smokers in the country. Two weeks after the news about "Uptown" hit the media, the outcry from black America was so loud that plans to introduce the cigarette went up in smoke.

But Dakotans—North and South—are a much smaller, more manipulable minority with much less clout. We're resigned to being ignored, and used to taking a lot of ribbing, even

from our neighboring states (several of whom have *very* little reason to feel superior), and not complaining much at all. "Dakota" cigarettes, though, may just do the trick.

The RJR marketing plan, made public by the *Washington Post*, offers this alluring profile of the average "Dakota" smoker: a woman with only a high school education, holding a "job" but not working at a "career." Her interests? "Partying with friends, dancing, going to clubs and bars, cruising, watching television, and shopping at the mall." Her live entertainment of choice? "Drag races, motocross, motorcycle races, hot rod shows, cycle shows, tractor pulls, monster trucks, wrestling, and tough-man competitions." Her favorite television show is *Roseanne*. The "Dakota" woman wants to get married, but until she walks down the aisle she will spend her free time "with her boyfriend, doing whatever *he's* doing."

"How dumb do they think we are?" asked Kathleen Wiebers, executive director of the South Dakota Lung Association. South Dakota has the fifth-lowest smoking rate in the nation, at 21.1 percent of the adult population. North Dakota is right in there, too; fewer than one-fourth of all North Dakotans smoke.

"Our women are more intelligent than that. I don't know where they get the idea that because we're out here in the wide-open spaces, we're stupid," said Alice Kundert, a former South Dakota secretary of state who has served as Christmas Seals chairwoman for the Lung Association.

Representative Cathy Rydell, a Bismarck, North Dakota, legislator who sponsored a 1987 state law to limit smoking in public places, found the cigarette and its name distasteful, but North Dakota tourism director Jim Fuglie doesn't mind the use of "Dakota" so long as the word "North" is absent. "Dakota," he said, "is a word that conjures up a tough guy or Old West images." (I don't know about the rest of you girls, but that's the look I try to achieve.)

I predict that RJR will stub out *this*

cigarette, too, before it's ever marketed (or shortly thereafter), even though, due to the very nature of North and South Dakotans, the company won't get the mail or public tongue-clucking on "Dakota" that it did on "Uptown."

For one thing, "Dakota" is simply the wrong name, demographically speaking, to use in seducing a large number of women. There are millions more women in the South, for instance, than in the Wild West, and it's the *Southern* women who have a *reputation*, deserved or not (surely it's not), for frequenting drag races and "professional" wrestling matches on the arm of a swaggering, toothpick-chewing stud. It would have been just as effective to name the cigarette "Grits" or "Possum Hollow" or, best of all, "Graceland," if RJR wanted sheer numbers. But then, those names would have been too *obviously* patronizing, wouldn't they?

In the second place, someone with a high school education who lives in the malls probably doesn't know where the Dakotas *are*—or that they have a virile Western reputation. A cigarette named "Death Valley" or "Tombstone" would stand more of a chance of tantalizing the women in the profile; they might have heard those names on reruns.

Mostly, though, women across the country are *not* as stupid as the boys at RJR seem to think. Those of us who don't already smoke probably won't start. Those of us who *do* smoke most likely have a favorite brand—and have proven fiercely resistant to change. And for years the cigarette *fantasy* of choice for most American women has been the Marlboro man, oozing more blue-eyed, barrel-chested, leather-faced virility than we can stand. Why would any of us want to pretend to be the Marlboro man?

*Jane Greer lives in Bismarck, North Dakota. She smoked an entire pack of something or other one night in Brookings, South Dakota, when she was 19 and hasn't touched cigarettes since then.*

# Letter From the Lower Right

by John Shelton Reed

## Another Country

Most of my news this month has to do, one way or another, with country music. In a roundabout way, a story out of South Carolina last fall got me thinking about that particular contribution of the South to world civilization.

It seems the dean of student affairs at the University of South Carolina asked the band to stop playing "Louie, Louie" at Gamecock football games. The spontaneous dancing the song provoked threatened the structural integrity of the university's football stadium.

Now, "Louie, Louie" is a grand period piece, a classic of the "Animal House" era. It's got a great beat, you can dance to it, and obviously people do. But "Louie, Louie" is about as far removed from country music as an American popular song can be. A remarkable aspect of that song, almost its essence, is that you can't understand the words. Moreover, *it doesn't matter*.

With country music, if you can't understand the words there's no point to it. The best of it is just good Southern talk, set to what are usually some pretty banal tunes. Just listen to George Jones, or to Hank Williams Jr., or to Loretta Lynn. Two examples, off the top of my head, of the power of words in country music: if the story in Dolly Parton's "Coat of Many Colors" doesn't make you cry, you have a heart of stone. And next time some judge is too scrupulous about defendants' rights, you'll find that Charlie Daniels' "Simple Man" articulates your feelings so well that you may want to reconsider them; it is, in fact, a stirring invitation to lynch law.

The point is that country music is almost always *about* something—not just about feeling romantic or lustful, either—and it recounts its stories with attention to the telling detail and the just-right phrase. Remarkably, this is more true now than even a decade ago. After some years of wandering in the lush wilderness of "the Nashville sound," a number of young singers have shown that you *can* turn back the clock. Among these neotraditionalists,

my favorite (and apparently everybody else's) is North Carolina's Randy Travis, who rivals the great George Jones when it comes to tearjerkers. Kentucky-bred Californian Dwight Yoakum is also worth a listen, although he has become a little too mannered for my taste.

Even more interesting in some ways are a few young musicians who have *not* simply reverted to the classic style. Lyle Lovett, for instance, can do traditional country as well as anyone, and does it to startling effect on his version of Tammy Wynette's hit "Stand By Your Man." As that example indicates, he doesn't hesitate to do the unexpected: one side of the album "Lyle Lovett's Large Band," for example, isn't country at all, but big-band swing. But my point here is that Lovett turns a phrase and tells a story with the best of the traditionalists.

So does another Texas singer-songwriter, Steve Earle. He, too, is no traditionalist; for one thing, he writes the kind of tunes you go around humming. His politics are probably unsound (though not his contempt for politicians). But his lyrics present a far more vivid and sympathetic picture of the frustrations of small-town and blue-collar American life than anything you'll hear from Bruce Springsteen. He sings about his "Sweet Little '66," oil-burning and gas-guzzling, but "made by union labor on American soil." (This is not your generic Beach Boys car song.) He sings about the life of a traveling musician with "a three-pack habit and a motel tan." And one of the all-time best lines in country music comes from a terrific song about a family man's impulsive Mexican fling: "I threw the car-seat in the dumpster and I headed out into the night."

Country music often presents little dramas, and sometimes it's grotesque—like life. Let me record a few recent news items that could easily be the stuff of country music. (OK, a transparently flimsy transition. I know.)

Consider the story of an infant put up for adoption who grows up and inadvertently marries his own mother. Sort of a classic theme, wouldn't you say? As it happens, that's the real-life predicament of a Tennessean named Danny James Bass. Mr. Bass has now filed for divorce, and he's trying to sell

rights to his story to the producers of *Dallas*. But I say it's a natural-born country song.

Or how about the saga of Mary Sue and Junior Davis? Last year a circuit court judge in Tennessee ruled that the dozen children of the recently divorced Davises were entitled to the protection of the state, notwithstanding that the offspring in question were embryos resident on petri dishes in a hospital freezer. Apparently Junior wanted to massacre the innocents to avoid having to pay child-support, while Mary Sue wanted to keep the little chaps alive, whether out of maternal feeling or spite was not stipulated. (Incidentally, the same folks who explained to me why only the mother's wishes should be consulted were mightily displeased when those wishes prevailed, in a ruling based not on her rights but on those of the children.) Science and law march on, and I know there's a ballad in there somewhere.

You think we may not be ready for songs about incest and infanticide (or whatever)? Well, maybe, but we already have a bunch about adultery and domestic violence, and at least one each about statutory rape (Hank Williams Jr.: "Knoxville Courthouse Blues"), homophobic violence (Charlie Daniels: "New Uneasy Rider"), and castration (Bobby Bare: "Big Dupree"). If you don't know country music, incidentally, maybe I should point out that the last two of these songs are *funny*.

Country music can also be downright weepy, of course, especially after a few drinks. And it seems that listening to the "wailing, lonesome, self-pitying" variety of country music encourages drinking. After a ten-year study of a bar in Missoula and less intensive study of 65 other taverns in the Minneapolis area, James Schaefer told the American Anthropological Association that slower music means faster drinking, and he has the numbers to prove it. "I don't think this warrants a surgeon general's warning or anything," Schaefer told the AP. "But people should be aware that they are more likely to lose their control and self-restraint in a country and western bar than anywhere else."

It was not reported whether Leonard Ray Lee was listening to country music but he certainly had been drink-